Family–School Collaboration and Positive Behavior Support

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Positive behavior support (PBS) offers schools a structured approach to address children's behavior from the individual level to the schoolwide level. Professionals are encouraged to include all relevant stakeholders, especially families, in actively planning, implementing, and evaluating the supports provided (Carr et al., 2002). However, successfully involving families in children's education is a complex and often difficult task (e.g., Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995); PBS practitioners can expect family–school collaboration efforts to be similarly challenging. This article reviews some of those challenges briefly, then advocates for ways in which family–school collaboration efforts can complement PBS initiatives in schools.

Parent Involvement in Education

Empirical literature strongly supports the association of parent involvement in education with substantial benefits, including greater academic success for children (e.g., Epstein, 1991; Rumberger, 1995) and increased parent support for teachers and schools (e.g., Ames, 1993; Epstein, 1986). Students whose families are involved in their education, regardless of family background or income, are more likely to earn higher grades, be promoted, show improved behavior, and enroll in postsecondary education programs (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). However, there is debate in the literature about whether and how parent involvement programs can affect such outcomes, given that supporting data are largely correlational rather than causal, and stud-

ies often have significant methodological flaws (Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002). Still, a growing number of studies show that the outreach practices of schools are a critical variable in engaging families in the learning process (e.g., Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000; Watkins, 1997), linking this outreach directly to student achievement (Epstein, Simon, & Salinas, 1997; Shaver & Walls, 1998). Thus, it appears that parent involvement matters in children's achievement and that schools can influence parent involvement processes.

Despite these many benefits, there is also evidence, less frequently discussed, that efforts to involve parents in their children's education may have unintended negative consequences. In a series of ethnographic studies, Lareau and her colleagues (Lareau, 1989; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lareau & Shumar, 1996) documented a number of serious difficulties. For example, some families' attempts to comply with demands from the school to help with homework resulted in increased conflict between parents and children or embarrassment when parents themselves did not know how to do the homework. Further, Lareau's data suggested that parents' ability to comply with school demands varies by social class. Specifically, middle-class parents tended to have greater flexibility in job schedules, better access to transportation and child care, and more extensive social networks of other parents from whom information about the school could be obtained than parents considered "working" or "lower" class. These resource differences made it easier for middle-class families to behave in ways con-

sistent with the school's expectations. Also, parents in working-class families defined their role with respect to the school differently than middle-class parents. Whereas middle-class parents were likely to express concerns directly to the teacher, working-class parents were more likely to engage in a pattern of "watchful waiting." These working-class parents saw themselves as very involved in their children's education, but teachers defined them as uninvolved. Parent involvement efforts that fail to account for these differences are not likely to accomplish their goals.

Differences in perceptions of teachers and parents can be explained in part by the definition of "parent involvement." Researchers and educators often use a "school-centric" definition (Lawson, 2003), in which involvement means parents assisting the school in reaching goals defined by the school (e.g., volunteering in classrooms, attending meetings, helping with homework). Such an approach inadvertently ignores the voices of many families, especially those from outside the mainstream culture who prefer to delegate responsibility for education to the school (Lareau, 1989). Lawson's ethnographic study was conducted in a low-income, ethnically diverse urban school and included parents described as "involved" and "uninvolved" by school personnel. Both groups of parents endorsed a "communitycentric" view of involvement, in which their role was to provide basic necessities (food, shelter) for their families and to protect their children from the influences of "the street" after school ends each day. These parents saw the school as a place where their children's physical safety was relatively assured; the school day enabled parents to attend to their other survival needs. Conversely, teachers tended to define involvement, in large part, as participation at the school. They were particularly unforgiving of parents who did not work outside the home; their lack of presence at the school was viewed as lack of caring. This study was also instructive with respect to differing views between parents and teachers regarding children's behavior. Parents perceived school personnel as afraid of students, resulting in a greater emphasis on controlling behavior than teaching. Further, they felt blamed for their children's misbehavior, which teachers attributed to parental irresponsibility and neglect. When school personnel see families as the *cause* of students' behavior problems, their "involvement" of these families may increase the likelihood of adversarial rather than cooperative interactions (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). In sum, it appears that parent involvement in children's education is an important goal, but care must be taken in how such involvement is encouraged.

Beyond "Parent Involvement"

One way in which these potential difficulties are addressed is through a more expansive definition of parent involvement. Partnership or collaborative approaches to parent involvement emphasize the development of shared goals, trusting relationships, mutual respect, and complementary expertise (Christenson, Rounds, & Franklin, 1992; Swap, 1993). From this perspective, providing support to families and learning from families are at least as important as gaining the support of families for school goals. Further, there is an emphasis on respecting differences in the ways in which families define their roles; it is understood that not all families will participate in the same ways. Family–school collaboration is seen not as an isolated set of activities, but rather as an essential element of student success that permeates every aspect of schooling (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Weiss & Edwards, 1992).

Epstein's (1995) typology is probably the best-known example outlining the various ways in which parents can support children's learning. She described six types of parent involvement activities, including parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Epstein emphasized the need to have multiple options available for each type of involvement; however, her typology has been criticized for its limited recognition of how challenging it is for some families to meet expectations the school considers "basic" (Lawson, 2003). Other authors have made more explicit the necessity of respecting parental choices by conceptualizing family–school collaboration along a continuum involving smaller numbers of families as demands for time and expertise increase (Moles, 1993; Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben Avie, 1996; Petr, 2003). In these approaches, all (or nearly all) families and educators are involved in providing support for children's learning and social emotional development through frequent, active communication. A large number of families and educators are involved in support activities at home and/or at school. Some families and teachers actively engage in learning/teaching activities such as workshops. Relatively few families and teachers are involved in governance and decision-making activities at the school or district level. At each level, there are multiple means for participation, and both families and educators are welcomed and active partners at all levels.

Central to the collaborative approach is the development of supportive relationships between families and educators. Although varying labels are used to describe the key elements of these relationships, multiple studies have documented the importance of interrelated constructs including trust, two-way communication, respect, and commitment (e.g., Adams & Christenson, 2000; Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Collaborative approaches also emphasize the importance of empowerment, which builds the capacity of families to serve as life-long advocates for their children. Embedded in this concept is the value that families should be asked to define their own needs and preferences; interventions should be individualized based on family-

identified priorities, and parental decision making should be supported. Families are seen as possessing strengths and competencies that can be applied to collaborative efforts; professionals attempt to understand and access families' informal social supports as part of intervention planning and implementation (Dunst, 2002; Dunst, Trivette, & La-Pointe, 1994).

There is emerging evidence that family–school collaboration principles can be effectively applied to a broad spectrum of school issues. For example, programs based in collaborative principles have been shown to improve school safety (Smith et al., 2004), to increase adolescent self-regulation and decrease behavior problems (Coatsworth, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2002), and to ease the transition to kindergarten (Pianta, Kraft-Sayre, Rimm-Kaufman, Gercke, & Higgins, 2001). At the schoolwide level, the School Development Program (SDP; Comer et al., 1996) is one of the best-known examples of the utility of collaboration in affecting positive school change. SDP schools operate on principles of collaboration (working cooperatively in respectful relationships toward common goals), consensus (rather than majority rule), and no-fault decision making (shared responsibility and avoidance of blaming). There is an emphasis on relationship building at all levels of the system (e.g., student–teacher, teacher–parent), and empowerment of both teachers and families is a key component. Although the model has proved difficult to implement broadly (Cook et al., 1999), there is evidence that the program has positive effects on student achievement and school climate in challenging urban schools (Cook, Murphy, & Hunt, 2000; Noblit, Malloy, & Malloy, 2001).

Collaboration and PBS

Within the PBS literature, the value of collaboration is mentioned frequently (e.g., Dunlap et al., 2000; Snell, 2002; Walker & Singer, 1993), particularly in the context of working with students with more severe disabilities. Recently, attention also has been directed to collaboration at the schoolwide level by applying principles associated with wraparound services (Scott & Eber, 2003). These authors noted the importance of taking a collaborative rather than an expert stance, avoiding blame, and focusing on student success in planning and implementing schoolwide support plans. Lucyshyn, Horner, Dunlap, Albin, and Ben (2002) defined collaborative partnerships with families in PBS as "the establishment of a truly respectful, trusting, caring, and reciprocal relationship in which interventionists and family members believe in each other's ability to make important contributions to the support process; share their knowledge and expertise; and mutually influence the selection goals, the design of behavior support plans, and the quality of family-practitioner interactions" (p. 12). Such relationships may help teachers and families better under-

stand each other's perspectives and avoid miscommunications that yield frustration on both sides.

Promoting Collaboration in PBS Schools

Despite increasing illustrations of the advantages of family–school collaboration, implementation in schools has been slow (Dunst, 2002; McWilliam, Maxwell, & Sloper, 1999). There are substantial structural (e.g., time and other resources) and psychological (e.g., feelings of efficacy) barriers to increased collaboration (Christenson, 2003). Overcoming these barriers is made more difficult by limited training opportunities for teachers. Few states require training in family involvement for teacher certification, and few teacher training programs emphasize those skills (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997). Recently, lack of training in working with families was cited by 48% of schools surveyed as a significant barrier to improving family participation in education (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Thus, although both educators and parents see parent involvement as desirable, educators are not typically provided with the skills to successfully support effective family–school collaboration. PBS training offers an opportunity to help teachers develop those skills.

When discussing how best to collaborate with families, the literature tends to emphasize the "what" rather than the "how" (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). This pattern also is evident in the PBS literature. That is, even within the processes in which families are expected to be active members, most attention may be given to procedures and forms, while relatively less attention is given to the communication and collaboration skills needed to successfully facilitate such interactions. For example, Crone and Horner (2003) offered a detailed method for implementing behavioral support teams and functional behavior analysis in schools. In discussing how to get the team to work together, the authors review a number of important processes, including efficiency, organization, and accountability in the team. However, there is little attention to other process issues, such as coping with emotionality, conflict, and strained relationships among team members. These latter issues could derail an otherwise well-planned PBS program. As noted in a commentary by Bambara (2002), the social process of enlisting and maintaining the support of others is at least as important as the technology, in the view of many practitioners. Although some skilled facilitators (e.g., psychologists, social workers) may already be part of building-based teams (Eber, Sugai, Smith, & Scott, 2002), most teachers have little training in communication skills and other process issues. Attention to relationship building at all levels of implementation may be a critical element in program success.

Examples are beginning to emerge that demonstrate the effectiveness of preservice (Blasi, 2002) and inservice

(Minke & Anderson, 2003) interventions in developing teachers' skills in these areas. However, there is not a single "right" set of activities that will yield effective collaboration (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001); rather, each school community needs to assess its particular context and develop relationship-building opportunities responsive to its specific circumstances. The needs assessment and school climate surveying that are part of many PBS initiatives offer vehicles in which these issues can be explored at the individual school level. Christenson and Sheridan (2001) provided an excellent overview of collaboration principles and offered multiple examples of ways schools can improve their relationships with families. Their book is recommended for PBS teams that have identified improved collaborative relationships as a priority.

Involving families effectively at all levels of PBS is challenging yet critical to meaningful implementation. Trusting, respectful relationships among teachers and families appear to be the foundation of successful interventions. Although each school must chart its own path, this review provides a starting point for discussion for school-based teams interested in creating and nurturing relationship-building opportunities at all levels of the PBS process.

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